

trust and instincts

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trust and instincts

by [DeathSquiggles](#)

Summary

An avian's wings are more than simple limbs; they're an extension of the very soul, and to willingly put the task of caring for them in another's hands is a monumental demonstration of trust.

Trust isn't something Tommy has an abundance of, these days.

But he's going to put what little he has left in Ranboo anyway.

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An ambiguously-canon addition taking place some time after chapter 7 of i wrote you a letter (i might never send it).

Notes

hello series subscribers. it is i, the partner in brainrot.

i'm very excited and MEGA honored to be making my first contribution to this series!!! i can't put into words how special it has been for me to come along for the ride as this story has developed and grown into something far grander in scope and more complex than i ever would have dared hope for back in january. it has dominated my attention and fueled my drive to create like nothing has before, and it got me through some of the really difficult times during this soft apocalypse we've all been marinating in. plus, i got a kickass friend and partner in brainrot out of it, so. it's all coming up deathsquiggles.

this fic will be lacking in a bit of context if you haven't read to be a wanderer, wandering and i wrote you a letter (i might never send it) up to chapter 7; i do think it still works as a standalone, so it's up to you if you haven't read those two works whether or not to abstain. enjoy!!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

It's with shaking hands and red-rimmed eyes that Tommy makes a decision: this evening, he'll ask Ranboo to help him preen his wings.

His body still trembles from the insidious grip of the nightmare that woke him just shy of dawn, and now with the sun a half hour over the horizon, he finally feels certain enough in his surroundings to leave the safe bastion of the bathroom. Before he goes, he meets his own eyes in the mirror- limpid blue, a pale facsimile of the azure that once burned with a fiery spirit unquelled by the promise of a challenge ahead. But in their glassy depths he finds a spark of what once was, and it brings a soft smile to his trembling lips. Maybe he isn't a reckless kid anymore- maybe he's weighed down by trauma and fear and the snap impulses that used to define him are distant memories to the careful calculations of risk that rule his waking life now- but he can still do this. He can still make a decision for himself and *stick* to it.

And he can still choose to ignore the screaming, clawing figments of his past that try to deny him this agency. This is Tommy's choice; *he* alone gets to choose, and he's choosing to put his soul in someone else's hands.

That's what wings are, to an avian. Soul. They're far more than limbs, and trusting their care to another- particularly someone who is neither a parent nor a fellow avian- it's just not common. Tommy has trusted like this before, in soft days of flowers woven into his hair and the ring of laughter peeling like a church bell through summer's ambience. Tubbo, with his intelligent eyes and his careful, methodical hands offered gently to assist when Tommy fell into a thicket and wound up with burrs stuck all over his wings. His instinct was to decline, and he did, at first- but they were a long walk from home where Phil could help him clean up his feathers and the itch of the burrs was unbearable. His tolerance for small irritants was never high.

("Just... Kinda get the burrs out and- and don't pull on any of the feathers, please.")

"You got it, bossman.")

A handful of other occasions after that saw Tubbo assisting Tommy in clearing debris from his feathers, and once or twice, just doing normal, routine preening. It's... An intense experience, letting someone in so close like that.

And in spite of the guilt it brings him to admit as much, Tommy can't say he regrets letting Tubbo touch his wings. His feelings toward the man are- complicated, to say the least, but... He can't honestly say he wouldn't do it all again, knowing what he knows now. The Tubbo who was his best friend and companion through so many years of his childhood is a different person from the cold, violent shadow who now wears his skin.

And just as with Ghostbur, his continued presence on the peripheries of Tommy's life will never truly allow him to grieve for what he's lost.

But that's- that's not part of this. Not today.

Today is for making new memories and forging new bonds on the foundations of a trust that was built through months of careful, measured work. Tommy is going to extend that trust just a little further.

With teeth brushed and pajamas donned, they settle in for the evening. Ranboo reads from one of Techno's thick tomes of old legends, ears flicking and drooping in reaction to the twists and turns of the passage. It's very endearing, if Tommy would deign to be so soft- and tonight, he would. He doesn't need to be perceived as tough and untouchable. Not in this room, not with this man.

He clears his throat.

Ranboo's ears twitch, but he doesn't look up from his book yet- though Tommy notes his eyes have stopped darting across the lines of text and have settled motionless at one fixed spot.

"Hey, Ranboo, um... W-would... Do you..."

Ranboo glances up now, fixing his gaze on Tommy's cheek while he stammers. A cold anxiety settles and pools around his ankles like a frigid tide, but- no. He won't let it stop him. He *wants* this.

Fuck it. "Will you help me preen my wings?"

Whatever Ranboo was expecting Tommy to say, that certainly wasn't it. His jaw drops and his brows shoot up, and he's a comic book picture of shock for a few horrible moments- and then his expression softens and glows with warm affection and he's clearly fighting off a little grin as he meekly replies, "Are you sure?"

"Yes- yeah," Tommy affirms, shutting his eyes tightly and nodding with all of the confidence he doesn't have. "Um. I- I might get- kinda n-nervous, though, so if I start to- to freak out-"

"I'll stop," Ranboo immediately promises. "You say the word, and I'll stop touching. We just do what you're comfortable with."

Tommy has to fight back the tears because- well, because he can *hear* the sincerity in Ranboo's voice. He may not be an avian, and he hasn't lived around Tommy's family for all that long, but he's clearly picked up on just how big of a deal it is for Tommy to ask this of him, and he's handling the matter with all of the gravity it demands. The unflinching understanding on display soothes the bile-sour memories of cruel fingers carding carelessly through his coverts, tracing the bone, grabbing, *snapping*-

Ranboo won't hurt me, Tommy thinks as loud as he can, trying to drown out the memory. *Ranboo won't hurt me. Ranboo cares about me- actually cares. Ranboo will listen if I tell him to stop. Ranboo would never cause me pain on purpose. Ranboo. Won't. Hurt. Me.*

He repeats it as an internal mantra as he undoes the snaps at his back and shrugs out of his nightshirt. It's easier, shirtless; the fabric can't get in the way of the scapulars and Ranboo will have a better idea of how his wings connect to the muscles of his back if he can actually *see* that connection.

"...Should I put my gloves on?"

Tommy glances over at Ranboo. He's set the book aside and is sitting up ramrod straight on the edge of his bed, fingers tightly laced on his lap. Tommy eyes the claws at the ends of his fingers, then distantly recalls a conversation they had what must have been *months* ago, now, wherein Ranboo explained that his sense of touch isn't nearly as refined as Tommy's. The paw pads get in the way of that.

"No," Tommy replies after a moment of consideration. "It'll be harder for you to feel what you're doing. Just be careful." After a moment, he adds, "I trust you."

Ranboo blinks hard, then nods.

"Um. You k-kinda need to be over here," Tommy points out.

"Oh- oh! Right, right, sorry-"

Tommy bursts into nervous giggles, Ranboo joining him a heartbeat later. Then he stands, brushes nonexistent dirt from his loose sleep pants, and walks the short distance to Tommy's bed. He settles beside him and returns his hands to his lap but he allows his gaze to roam freely over Tommy's wings, which Tommy supposes is fair, even if it kicks up that instinctive wariness buried deep in the truly avian part of his brain.

"Okay, so," Tommy begins, then pauses to clear his throat again and wring his hands out. "Basically, you just- sorta, uh, straighten the feathers out. I-if any of them are broken or falling out, you can just kinda w-wiggle them a bit, side to side; if they're loose, they'll come right out, but- *please don't pull*. They'll- they'll come out if they're ready."

Ranboo listens intently and nods along. "Straighten them out, wiggle the ones that seem broken or close to falling out, and *do not* pull. Is that right?"

Tommy breaks into a grin. "Yeah, that's- that's pretty much it. Not super complicated. But, ah... I..." He debates internally for a moment, then exhales forcefully and continues, "I might act kinda- kinda strange. It's- there's endorphins and shit, and it makes us go all gooey, a-and..."

Ranboo nods again with a soft smile. "That's okay."

Tommy nods back and blows out another nervous breath, because- he's run out of things to say to delay this. It's just him, now, and whether or not he can push through the anxiety.

“O-o-okay,” Tommy stammers, then grimaces. “Fuck. Sorry. Nervous.”

Ranboo reaches for him, but pauses halfway there, leaving the option to Tommy; he gratefully accepts his hand and threads their fingers together, leaning to the side to bonk his head gently into Ranboo’s shoulder.

“I w-want to be able to do this,” he murmurs. “I-it should be *m-my* decision. He doesn’t g-get to take this f-from me.”

“He doesn’t,” Ranboo agrees, leaning his head to rest against Tommy’s. His coarse hair flops down and tickles Tommy’s nose, making him smile. “You get to decide. But that also means you decide when you’re ready. There’s no rush.”

Tommy considers his words, then leans harder into his side, wrapping his free arm around Ranboo’s chest and pulling him into a sort of side-hug. Ranboo chirps in a way that Tommy recognizes as distinctly happy, then winds his own free arm around Tommy’s shoulders to envelope him more fully- not restricting, but just... Present.

He allows himself a half minute more of basking in that closeness before pulling away.

“Okay, let’s- here, let me...” Tommy scoots away from Ranboo so he has room to turn his body and let his wings drape over the bedspread and Ranboo’s lap. They’re warm where they touch him- Tommy wagers it’s the ghost part that lets Ranboo run so hot, but Ranboo has said before that he doesn’t actually know why his normal temperature is so high. Then again, most people are warm compared to Tommy; keeping in heat is a struggle most avians face, and he’s no exception.

“...Can I touch?” Ranboo asks.

Tommy glances over his shoulder and finds Ranboo sitting stiff and straight with his hands hovering a good half a foot above his wings. “Yeah, g-go ahead.”

He makes himself look away and close his eyes, repeating his mantra to keep the sickly anticipation under control.

The first contact of warm fingers against his feathers makes Tommy’s entire body flinch and every muscle tense up. Ranboo immediately pulls away but Tommy quickly stammers, “No, n-no, it’s- it’s okay, I’m okay, I’m good,” and forces himself to relax again.

“You sure?”

Tommy nods forcefully.

A few moments later, Ranboo brushes his fingertips gingerly over his wing again, and this time Tommy is able to clamp down on the instinct to shy away and he remains dutifully still. With hesitance, Ranboo comes to hover over a misaligned feather- Tommy can feel his body heat just shy of contact- and then, after a long pause, he gently guides it back into place, relieving the slight itch.

A contented sigh spills from Tommy's lips, and he grimaces internally- it was *one* damn feather. Nothing worth such a big reaction. But then Ranboo fixes another feather nearby, and gingerly wiggles the broken secondary Tommy hasn't been able to reach, and he practically melts back into Ranboo's hand as it comes easily loose.

"Was that okay?" Ranboo quickly asks, clear fretting in his voice.

"Mmmhmm," Tommy hums. "S'good."

Ranboo chirps lightly and goes back to preening, picking a position near the top of Tommy's right wing to work from and methodically fixing the little spots that have gotten messed up over the day's activities (and if Tommy went for a flight earlier so there would be more to do, no one has to know).

Each touch bolsters Tommy's confidence and smothers the embers of anxiety still smoldering in his stomach. Ranboo makes small sounds of concentration as he works, trilling quiet admonishment at feathers that don't want to budge from their misalignment and chirping happily when he finally corrects them, and his tail gradually migrates over to curl around Tommy's waist. The tufted end twitches in sync with Ranboo's noises.

Tommy coos in a distinctly avian way and can't even bring himself to be embarrassed. The endorphins are kicking in and turning his racing thoughts into a lazy river of contentment, and his body goes loose and jelly-like. Every soft touch sends a wave of pleasant tingles through. Tommy's eyes droop nearly shut and he fights to keep from nodding off.

"Okay, um... I think this one is done," Ranboo murmurs, running his hand over the feathers in search of any others in need of correction.

Tommy coos again and stretches his wing out a bit to encourage the touch. After a pause, Ranboo does it again, gliding the soft paw pads at the ends of his fingers from the top of Tommy's wing to as far down as he can reach in this position, which is still pretty damn far.

"*God*, that's good," Tommy mumbles.

Ranboo laughs lightly under his breath. "Do you want to come sit on the other side of me so I can do the other one?"

Oh, that's a good idea- that's the *best* idea, actually, and Tommy would very much like for Ranboo to preen his other wing. He blinks the sleepiness from his eyes and hauls his heavy limbs up so he can settle on Ranboo's other side, not hesitating even for a moment this time before splaying his left wing over Ranboo's lap.

Ranboo gets to work and Tommy basks in the wave of affection and comfort.

And then Ranboo adjusts a feather right over the spot where Dream snapped his bones like they were twigs, and the pleasantness is cut through by a stabbing rush of dread.

Ranboo picks up on the change immediately and withdraws his hand, but it's too late; Tommy is already hyperventilating, his heart picking up the pace in his chest, and an

overwhelming nausea grips him as he struggles to swallow down the whimper building in his throat.

I know it hurts, he'd said, but I had to do it. For your safety, y'know?

I have to keep you safe.

Cold fingers curl around his wing and the bone yields just as easily beneath their firm pressure as a river accepting a stone tossed into its water. The pain is viscerally real, though Tommy retains enough of a grip on his surroundings to recognize that it's just in his head- an echo of a memory, playing out in horribly violent detail across the rigid statue his body has become. Tears well up in his eyes.

"Tommy? Are you okay?"

Ranboo's soft concern breaks through the fog.

"It's just you and me here. You're safe."

"R-right," Tommy chokes out. He heaves several shuddering breaths, then swallows hard and runs his fingers through his hair, still wavy from the braid he'd had it in earlier in the day.

It's just them. Just Ranboo, with his unflinching support and careful attentiveness to Tommy's moods. Ranboo, who has stuck with him through the darkest and most bitter times of his life. Ranboo, who he trusts, who he *loves*-

Ranboo, who *will not* hurt him.

"I'm fine," Tommy breathes. "M'fine, just- keep going? Please?"

"Should I avoid that area?"

Tommy grits his teeth. "Are there more spots there that need preening?"

"Um... Y-yeah, just a couple of misaligned ones," Ranboo replies. "Maybe you should do those...?"

He bites down hard on his instinct to agree. "No, I- I'll be okay, if you'll still... If you're okay with h-helping, still. I won't freak out again."

Ranboo reaches to take Tommy's hand, sitting clenched beside his thigh on the bedspread. He gingerly presses into Tommy's palm until he relaxes enough for Ranboo to weave their fingers together as he murmurs, "You don't have to keep going if you're not comfortable. We can stop."

Tommy takes a deep breath, then nods. "I know. That's- that's why I don't *want* to stop. I know I c-can trust you, and you won't- won't touch me if I say no. I don't want to stop just- just b-because Dr- because someone *else* d-didn't stop when I t-told them to."

He flexes both wings, reminding himself with the physicality of it that the damage Dream did is repaired and the injury is behind him. And... He's not alone anymore. The last time Dream threatened him, he got Phil's sword through his chest mere minutes later, and Tommy has no doubt that anyone else living in their little arctic compound would do the exact same thing.

...Except maybe Wilbur, but-

He's decided not to think about that too much.

"If you're sure," Ranboo says, but something about his tone is... Strained.

"...Are *you* sure?" Tommy quietly asks. "If you don't want to help anymore, I- I understand. I can finish b-by myself if you're not comfortable."

Ranboo is already shaking his head before Tommy can complete his sentence. "It's not that. I'm just really worried I'll make you panic again."

"I don't- don't think you will," Tommy reassures. "I'm expecting it now. J-just do those ones first, maybe?"

Ranboo exhales slowly and squeezes Tommy's hand, then pulls away. "Please tell me if you start feeling bad again."

"I will," Tommy promises.

It's infinitely more manageable this time, aided in no small part by the way Ranboo murmurs under his breath before touching.

"Okay, gotta move this one a bit to the left, coming in now..." He makes the correction. "Alright, and this one looks kinda shabby, I'll wiggle it to see if it comes out..."

In no time at all, the comfortable haze wraps back around Tommy's consciousness and blankets him in warm trust and affection. He loses himself in the process; Ranboo's ministrations are soothing to something deeply primal in Tommy's soul, and he feels both a sense of pride in himself for taking this step and a profound fondness for Ranboo for being so patient with him while he does so. More than anything, he feels *loved*, in all of the ways that were carved out of him in exile. But he's not just healing; he's *growing*. Brash bravado replaced by true confidence, cruel impulsiveness replaced by compassion- he's changing, and it's for the better.

It takes another few minutes for Ranboo to finish the left wing. When he does, he makes to pull away, but Tommy mumbles a vague protest that draws him back. He cards his fingers carefully through the feathers and Tommy melts into the touch.

"I love you," Tommy croons. "M so glad we met. So happy you're part of the family now."

"I'm... Part of the family...?"

Tommy hums the affirmative. "Course you are, Ranby. You're my brother. Techno's, too. And I know Phil thinks of you as a son."

There's a pause, and then a distinct snuffle that has Tommy blinking his eyes open and craning his neck to look over his shoulder. Ranboo holds a hand over his mouth while tears well up from his eyes- the first one leaks over the edge and there's an immediate sizzling of water against his skin.

Tommy snaps out of his preening trance enough to quickly turn and scoot up beside Ranboo, reaching to swipe the tear from his cheek with his sleeve and cup Ranboo's face in his hands, though he keeps his gaze on Ranboo's cheeks.

"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," Ranboo says, then laughs in that distinctly wet way that only comes from crying. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I just- I'm happy."

"Oh." Tommy considers for a moment, then pulls Ranboo into a hug. Ranboo's arms immediately draw Tommy in closer and he buries his face into Tommy's shoulder.

"Thank you," he whispers. "I- I love you, too."

Tommy squeezes him tighter.

After a long moment, they separate. Tommy's head is mostly clear of the preening fog, but he still feels a lingering desire to keep Ranboo next to him- though that may just be his normal feelings through a slight intensifier rather than a direct result of the endorphins. Either way, the thought of Ranboo leaving to go sleep in his bed all the way across the room is intolerable.

"D'you wanna sleep in my bed tonight?" Tommy asks.

Ranboo trills, then slaps a hand over his mouth and flushes as he nods.

They curl up in a tangle of Ranboo's lanky limbs and Tommy's freshly preened feathers. It's oddly comfortable to cuddle with Ranboo in spite of his angular body; he's just... Soft, and warm, and he rumbles ever so slightly when he breathes, and his tail curls around Tommy's leg, and Tommy just feels- secure. Surrounded, but not trapped; protected, but not suffocated.

He falls asleep with his head in the crook of Ranboo's arm and gets the best night of rest he's had in years.

End Notes

they're brothers your honor.

i have a lot of stuff in the works for this series!!! most of it can't be posted until the main story is concluded, but i might have some more asides for you guys in the future, so subscribe to the series if you want to be notified of those. :3

thank you for reading! <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!